

# Remote Teacher Love

written by Mark Gozonsky | February 8, 2021



Image Credit: photos (Stephanie Astrow); design (Lilly Astrow)

Teaching under any circumstances, dire or otherwise, is largely about holding back. You love your students, of course. That's a prerequisite. It's a very high-level, conceptual love, a Knights of the Round Table type of thing, involving good deeds—*not* the piercing falsetto love of love songs.

Teacher love also doesn't last. It used to bother me how eleventh graders vanished into twelfth grade, never to be seen again. Now I look at eleventh graders as annual flowers, such as cosmos and zinnia. Sunflowers, too. Loveliness incarnate. They last as long as they last and that's that. If you want to experience those flowers again—delicate stems, fierce color, mathematical elegance—you have to plant new seeds, which is like getting a new class of students.

I had one former eleventh grade student, two years ago, come in at lunchtime shortly after the start of twelfth grade. She announced it was her birthday and that we were having lunch together. There was no discussion; it was fact.

She might have been checking up on me. I had been out sick the last month of the previous school year—a little brain damage—all better now. I'm not supposed to do martial arts anymore, that was the main lasting effect. Avoid getting punched in the head. Also avoid lifting the heavier weights. If it makes you grunt loudly, probably wise not to lift it. A little grunt is okay.

I explained all this to her, a girl I cannot even visual except in the most abstract terms. Graceful. Tallish. Dark hair, shoulder-length, maybe a bit longer. If I inner-squint, I visualize a cafeteria lunch tray and two mylar birthday balloons. She wanted to make sure I was okay; that was the impression that I got. A kind and caring person. I appreciated this. She was someone who had started off eleventh grade with writing issues—the usual stuff, no paragraphs, run-on sentences—but over the course of the year, she took care of those problems and now was aloft, on her own, college-bound.

I must have done a good job assuring her that I was okay because I never saw her again, not even in the hallway.

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Holding back is how it is over the long haul of the school year and also in the pedagogic moment. Even when I could go on and on about how Samuel Johnson compiled the first English dictionary by himself in a year. Samuel Johnson was so disfigured by infant scrofula that as a grown man he looked like a scarred monster and children backed away from him, one more reason why Samuel Johnson's own attempts at school teaching failed. Samuel Johnson's best friend was a convicted murderer. Samuel Johnson addressed homelessness in his neighborhood by inviting unhoused people to live with him. All of this matters urgently, but not so urgently that I keep at it for more than seven minutes. The length of "Layla" is as far as I go. After seven minutes, nothing matters more than giving students a break, so I stop.

I do not stop so they can ask questions. I stop on humanitarian grounds. When students have questions, they ask, unprompted, immediately, interrupting. One of the best ways to get an unruly class to simmer down is to ask if anyone has questions.

Nowadays, of course, online, there is no unruliness. On Zoom, the students assemble as black rectangles, hard not to imagine as stacked coffins.

I combat morbid imagery with my microphone in its flexible, expandable and retractable metal-arm mic stand: remote learning high school English teacher as DJ / public radio personality. I brush my lips against the microphone's soft foam cover. I balance my nose upon it, like a seal. Someone, somewhere, should be having fun. During COVID times, during school hours, that's me.

Enthusiasm.

Contagious.

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Teacher love is also not father-daughter love. I know this because I became a teacher in my heart the moment my twin daughters, formerly the squirmy infants I had swaddled like burritos in my cotton T-shirts, strode down the aisle of the Castle Heights Elementary School auditorium to join their kindergarten teachers. You can't get rid of me that fast, I vowed, and soon thereafter signed up for teacher training school.

Yet father-daughter love does not equate to teacher-student love, as the most recalcitrant fifth grader in my first-ever class pointed out: "You got your daughters at home to love you, Mister. We ain't here for that."

I did talk about my daughters a lot in class until I realized, belatedly, that this alienated the students. What about us, was their perfectly understandable response. You had to put all the handprint-in-wet-cement memories aside and focus on the children in front of you.

Teacher love is also not love for all of humankind. You can't be all nice like that. Otherwise, kids naturally get distracted by thinking about how they can take advantage of you. Strict, but not mean. Never mean. This is a matter of self-preservation, as anything you do that might humiliate a student is certain to come back at you tenfold.

When I talk about how much of teaching is about holding back, I mean holding back not only many good intentions, such as solving problems for them, but also bad intentions such as sarcasm and snappy retorts of any kind. There is no coming back from raising of the voice in anger; the breakage there is permanent and light does not get in.

So teacher love is not father-daughter love, nor love of humanity, but it does consist to some degree of controlled rage. Herein lies a clue. What is the teacher raging about? The distance between the real and the ideal.

The ideal is, we are all immersed in close reading of diverse, relevant authors; and in our own writing, matching nuanced claims with fine-tuned detail.

The real is, I have an entire class worth of kids missing because of COVID-19. What is the love that enables a remote teacher to navigate the chasm of mass absence?

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I reached out with electronic messaging to the 60 of my 220 students who hadn't turned in any work at all by mid-semester—"I don't have any record of you turning anything in. Does that sound right? What's happening?"

Half of those sixty kids get back to me.

They say:

Both of my parents are in the hospital. I'm taking care of my three brothers.

Or, I'm not in the best place, mentally. Even the simplest things are hard to do.

Whatever their situation, they all say this—I'll try to get some work turned in tomorrow.

The 30 kids who don't get back to me: that's an entire class worth of kids, missing. In a typical year, you'll have four or five kids ghost on you like that. I tallied these missing kids and sent the list to the attendance counselor, then turned my attention back to the students who are hanging in there.

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One of the highest forms of teacher love is giving a kid a book. That's the exchange: not a rose or a ring. The book. I don't care if I ever get these books back. Let them do their good off the shelf, in the world. Books I have let go include *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*, *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, the graphic novel version of anything, and twice—this is vinyl, not a book—*Good Kid, m.A.A.d City*.

Yet many is the time I have had books I recommended to a kid left on the desk after class. I tell kids it's okay if they don't want to read it because I didn't write it, but this is not true. The book left on the desk is an arrow to the soul, so one way I know the soul is immortal is that I keep giving books away.

I have one kid in my English Language Development class: she really wants to reclassify so she can end being branded deficient in English and instead take a dance class. I dropped *Children of Blood and Bone* at the heavily plexi-glassed school front desk for her to pick up. I have another kid in AP English Language. She told me she's dyslexic but wanted to take the class for the challenge. For her I left *The Song of Achilles*.

Sometimes I wonder if my practice with students is really love or just common decency. For example, I always put a graphic on anything I hand out to them, or nowadays, share online. An all-text form feels too soul-sucking, like I'm making them do their taxes. The graphic may relate to the topic, or not. Armadillos are always good. Back when we were in the classroom, the graphic gave many students something to color in. I don't know what they do with them now.

I greet each one of my kids on Zoom. Howdy, how are you, how's it going. They say fine, fine, okay. If they say great, I ask, "How'd you get the upgrade?" and they say, "I just woke up in a good mood" or "My dog licked me and he doesn't usually lick me."

Licking is good. Just don't lick that dog back!

Flexibility on deadlines: love or decency? When the world is engulfed by pandemic, when the state of California has been on fire and is likely to be

on fire again: is this the time to be a stickler for deadlines? I used to be a big "a deadline is a deadline, because that's the way real life works" guy but not anymore. How does real life work now?

I don't know, but these days I am much more encouraging about revisions. You can do an assignment over three times for a higher grade. Revising is learning.

Kids have a hard time believing this. They ask over and over, "Can I get a better grade if I redo it?"

The answer is always yes.